

MEL KEEGAN

NARC

3



SCORPIO

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SCORPIO

PARC #3

Mel Keegan

DreamCraft Multimedia, Australia

SCORPIO

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First published in October 2004 by DreamCraft Multimedia.

ISBN: 0-9750884-7-5

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This edition printed and bound in the USA.

PARC: SCORPIO

CHAPTER ONE

Kevin Jarrat sprawled flat on his back, glaring up at unfamiliar constellations and listening for the whine of overdriven repulsion engines. His helmet lay discarded in the rank grass at his right hand, and he ignored it. The imaging systems were so badly damaged, his own senses were preferable. A scar the width of his thumb was gouged into the polished black dome. His neck and shoulders still ached after an impact that had tossed him off his feet.

The ruins of Montevideo were a field of bleached bones before and below him, picked clean by the grudging light of three tiny moons. The city was abandoned, but the lights of the spaceport still lit up the night sky, like a battlefield over the horizon. Sheal was on Jarrat's mind as he watched the sky, listened for the whine of incoming engines and acknowledged his body's stubborn aches. Three years of corporate war had almost leveled Montevideo. Lately the spaceport had been downgraded to a low-security bulk cargo field, on a world where the terraformers had never really finished their work before the colony was abandoned.

The air was too thin and dry for humans' comfort. Jarrat was breathing heavily. His lungs protested since he had discarded the helmet, and its re-breather, of necessity. With the imaging systems out of commission, he needed every sense he possessed. The column of gray smoke and fire retardant fumes angling out of the west marked the position where his aircraft had gone down. The Corsair was not burning, but he had pushed the descent into critical overheat on both repulsion generators to break his fall from low orbit, and even the VM 104 — so newly assigned to both Starfleet and NARC that most pilots were still training — struggled to arrest the blaze.

Stone was out there somewhere. Jarrat's ears strained to pick the sound of engines out of the whimper of the wind in the scrub forest which had begun to reclaim the city ruins. For ten minutes he had heard nothing, but he *knew* Stoney was out there, perhaps in space right over his head, perhaps over the terminator, where a storm front was breaking over the war-ravaged city. Jarrat *knew* this, while the helmet sensors had shown him only an empty sky and the AI aboard the stricken Corsair reported only sporadic traffic on the comm bands used by the smugglers.

Oromon might have been officially abandoned as a colony, but it was more than halfway terraformed. At least two of its smaller cities were largely intact, the cargo port was still operational, and it was so far off the beaten track, neither Starfleet nor the Army had the time or resources to police it. In a matter of months after the withdrawal of colonial services, Oromon became a haven for smugglers of every description.

And for Angel smugglers in particular. Jarrat's wide pupils, attuned to the blue darkness by now, picked up the sternflare of a small, fast craft headed northwest. It could have been a Corsair. Another man might have risked his cover and called out, drawing down fire on his own position, but Jarrat did not even reach for the helmet. He knew it wasn't Stone. His partner was a good distance away, and *busy*.

He was probably bucking reentry, Jarrat thought: he felt the heavy buffeting in his own spine, and his nerve endings tingled with Stone's reactions as he kicked his repulsion higher and sharpened his descent angle for a fast, hard reentry.

Which meant someone was right behind him. Jarrat was not surprised. The smuggler pilots were damned good. Ex-mercenaries, often trained by Starfleet, turned 'free-market' for quick dollars. For over an hour, since they launched from the Starfleet carrier in Oromon high orbit, Jarrat had been aware of the physical stresses, the fierce adrenaline rush, as Stone made himself visible. His role was to decoy the smuggler aircraft, freeing Jarrat to make the covert run, fast and low, over the ruins of Montevideo.

The mission plan was simple. NARC observers had pinpointed a facility in the foothills of the Caucus Mountains — this Angel lab was feeding cities as far afield as Alvarez, in the heart of the Cygnus Colonies. The security of the Montevideo cargo port was stretched thin. Angel manufactured in the shadow of the Caucuses was shipped out under the noses of at least one shift of freight loaders, and the next time it showed up was on the streets of cities like Elysium. Until Vic Duggan broke the smuggling racket, there was no doubt Avalon's supply of Angel would have been made here on Oromon, though the burden of proof always rested squarely on the shoulders of NARC.

The sternflares chased quickly into the northwest, angling over the sprawl of the ruined city. Jarrat began to relax. His gloved right fingers slid away from the butt of the Colt AP-60 and he lowered himself back into the tangle of buck briar and rhino grass. Patience, he told himself. Easy to say it. Difficult to take his own advice, when his every instinct was to knock Colonel Jack Brogan on his ass.

The mission plan had been simple, but as usual the simple found a way to go haywire. Brogan's squadron had been flying the Vincent Morello Aerospace Corsair for three weeks now. They should have been fully competent to fly topcover for a NARC 'special op.' But Brogan's crew contrived to be elsewhere when the two NARC aircraft were picked up by the radars from Montevideo Field. In seconds the smugglers were in the air, using the feed from the spaceport radars for guidance. They were inside spaceport security, and again Jarrat was unsurprised, though he swore bitterly as he and Stone were jumped.

The rogue pilots were impressive, and they were flying assorted Yamazake, short-range craft, space to surface, lightly armed — but enough to put a missile into the engine housing of Jarrat's 104. By the time Brogan's squadron was in the right place, the NARC operation was taking heavy fire, outnumbered five to one, and Stone had not yet shaken the tail he had picked up as he commenced the decoy run.

Jarrat would have given anything he possessed for a NARC gunship in the air over Montevideo. If Gil Cronin's Blue Ravens had been on call, he would have felt no pricking of adrenaline, no rush of blood in his ears as he listened for the howl of overdriven repulsion motors and thought he heard them, still a long way out.

He had been listening for the sound since he put down the Corsair and left fire control to the AI. The engines shut down immediately. Electrical fires were smothered fast, but the plane remained a big, fat target, glowing brightly in infrared. As Jarrat's boots hit the ground he went down in a tuck-and-roll and then he was running with just one thought in his mind: distance and cover.

Cover was easy to find. Montevideo was a field of blasted ruins, the shells of buildings still upright here, pits fifteen meters deep there, and everywhere the formidable buck briar, native to this world and thriving in the heavier air, the product of an abandoned terraforming program. But Jarrat was still a bright target on thermoscan, and he went to ground on the slope of a stormwater channel, where the elements and rhino grass had almost erased the buildings.

A dozen shots spat at him from two or three hundred meters out, and if the shooter had been using something with a little more caliber Jarrat would have been out cold. The shot tore a piece out of the helmet, spun him around and flung him into the bottom of the washaway. Wisely, he stayed down.

At once, imaging went intermittent. The helmet was as blinding and deafening as any VR visor. The rebreather seals broke with a hiss of compressed gas and the helmet skittered away into briar.

On knees and elbows Jarrat snaked into the undergrowth. Thorns snagged the thin pressure skin he wore, and he swore lividly. The second thing he would have traded any item he possessed for was riot armor, but Starfleet used no such hardware, and the cockpits of the borrowed VM 104s were not designed for armored pilots.

Beggars, Jarrat thought grimly, could not be choosers ... and for once in its thirty-year existence NARC was reduced almost to begging. The legacies of Equinox Industries were far-reaching and still wreaking havoc. It was Randolph Dorne who put Jarrat on his back, nursing transient injuries in a stormwater channel while Stone dropped like a brick through a difficult, re-entry that tested every joint and tendon.

Aside from the *Athena*, the only carrier left operational in the quadrant was Starfleet's *Olympic*. Every other big ship, NARC, Army and Starfleet alike, was drydocked while a crew headed by Yvette McKinnen and Karl Budweisser systematically ran the routines McKinnen had written to release the *Athena* from Equinox's strange bondage. The *Huntress*, the *Avenger*, the *Virago*, the *Vixen* — all were stood down, while the *Athena* herself was on assignment, two days into the Cygnus Colonies.

NARC was spread dangerously thin. When the Angel lab on Oromon was located at last, the only ranking NARC officers in the zone were Jarrat and Stone, aboard the only operational Starfleet carrier, and for once NARC got lucky.

For ten days Jarrat and Stone had been flying with Brogan's training squadron, coming up to speed with NARC's new acquisition, the VM 104 Corsair. On orders from Darwin's World the *Olympic* diverted to Oromon, and the routine of carrier-based training missions switched gears dangerously fast.

Jarrat sucked in a breath as he felt a sudden falling sensation in the pit of Stone's belly. The other Corsair had dipped a wing, pivoted like a dancer on its repulsion cushion, and Stone cut speed so hard, so fast, the breath was knocked out of his lungs. Jarrat *felt* him gasp windedly, felt his heart race, almost saw the 'shock diamonds' in his own vision as violent G-forces squeezed his eyeballs. Then the hot flood of Stone's adrenaline hit him, a body blow to the gut, and he could only guess Stone had come up on the bandit's tail.

Where in hell was he? Jarrat's wide eyes had begun to scan the sky, looking for the blink of running lights, the blue-white of superhot tailpipes, the arc of tracer, when his ears pricked. The distant whine of repulsion motors was thicker, heavier, becoming a persistent, aggravating howl.

With an intense effort of will, Jarrat set aside the keen acid-burn of Stone's feelings. Stone was almost certainly in command of his own situation, but the dizzying secondhand sensations were about to be the death of Jarrat. Teeth gritted, he turned over in the coarse grasses and visually scanned the hillside above the washaway. He broke the pressure seals and pulled off the gloves, tossed them away, and his right hand molded about the long-familiar shape of the Colt.

As he saw the halogen flare of massive driving lights he thumbed off the safety. Stone's sensations faded into the back of his mind and Jarrat took a deep breath of the dust-dry air. The floodlights glared over the crest of a rise marked by a two-meter thicket of rhino grass and a spire of naked steel, all that remained of a tumbled building. The vehicle behind the driving lights was lost in the glare, but Jarrat had caught a bare glimpse of it just before he ditched.

It was some kind of construction tractor, more than likely a relic abandoned by the terraformers. An ugly array of cranes, drills and geocannons armored the front of it. The rear hull, around the engine deck, was as solid as the skin of a gunship, protecting the nuclear powerplant. Twenty meters long and four wide, the tractor came over the rise with a howl of overstressed machinery. It may be a behemoth, with a frightening weight of armor and a geocannon providing unspeakable firepower, but it was old and patched together. Angel smugglers rarely respected their equipment.

Flattened out in the stormwater channel, Jarrat blinked against the glare and watched the tractor labor over the rise, roughly in his direction. They had a sketchy idea of his position, but the driving lights were angled away into the darkness and he realized they were guessing. He felt a hot prickle through his nerve endings — not from Stoney this time. It was the very edge of a powerful scanner field. He froze, in case motion sensors were aimed at him, and held his breath.

In the pilot's skinsuit he was almost ambient with the environment, but not quite cold enough. Repulsion generators howled in protest as the tractor

slewed around, wallowing like a pig in mud. The floodlights shriveled Jarrat's irises and he swore. They had picked him up, he had known they would eventually.

The tractor was still more than two hundred meters away, but at that size, that mass, the distance was trivial. Jarrat no longer had any reason to guard his position. He bobbed up fast, and the Colt pumped six armor-piercers into the blinding lights. The floods exploded and the night was dark once more.

Too dark — his night vision was ruined. All he saw was a confusion of green arcs, like solar flares in his protesting corneas. He squeezed his eyes shut, dove back into the washaway and *listened*.

The whining roar of the beat-up old repulsion sled under the tractor blanketed every other sound, hurting his ears as it wallowed closer. Machinery on the deck began to growl. Were they maneuvering the crane, starting up the drill? The geocannon would be overkill, and Jarrat would have bet money on the fact they had no ammunition for it, but the tractor's routine tools made awesome weapons.

Fear sped Jarrat's heart, and he knew Stone must feel it. But fear was healthy. His senses sharpened, the long muscles in his thighs tingled with blood. His fingers cradled the Colt as if it were a captive bird, and Sheal was on his mind again as he pressed into bare earth, briar and rubble-dust, and waited for the tractor.

He knew where to hit it, to hurt it — not to kill, but to cripple the behemoth. But he would have to let the machine come perilously close. "Stoney," he muttered as he crouched over the AP-60 and turned his head to shield at least one ear, "where in Christ's name —"

The tractor seemed to be almost on top of him. Jarrat could not even hear himself yell as he rolled away from the roasting heat of the repulsion downwash and fired instinctively. These tractors were so similar to Army troop transports, he could have piloted one in his sleep, jury-rigged running repairs in the field. Or undone someone else's work.

A dozen armor-piercing .60 caliber rounds from the Colt raked the underside of the hull. He could never hope to shoot through, but he held his breath, held down the trigger, until several consecutive rounds slammed into the forward repulsion projector.

A cloud of escaping coolant haloed the projector. Generators overran, screamed in agony, and kill-switches shut them down before an explosion could blow back through the tractor. The eighty-tonne monster slewed away from Jarrat, back toward the top of the rise. Heavier generators in the sled under the engine deck struggled to compensate for the failure of the forward gravity resist, but in moments they too were screaming, overloaded and rushing into critical overheat.

As the primitive AI shut them down the tractor bottomed out hard. The crane jarred loose, the arm broke free with a shriek of steel on steel, and Jarrat dove into the bottom of the stormwater ditch as the five-tonne boom swung toward him.

With a sound like an artillery round striking it tore through the ruined shell left from some raid close to the end of the corporate war which had ruined

Oromon, and buried itself in the earth. Main engines grumbled dangerously, and moments later the tractor's rudimentary AI — showing more sense than the humans aboard — shut them down.

The sudden quiet was as stunning as the thunder of protesting engines, but for the moment Jarrat had the advantage, and he was not about to let it slip through his fingers. He was moving while the tractor was still settling into a bed of dirt and rubble. He had one ace to play, one gamble left to make.

Sheer surprise would make the Angel smugglers slow. They had come out in a vehicle they believed made them invulnerable; now they were crippled, immobile, with their target still on the loose. They would not hesitate for long, and Jarrat had not disabled their power or their sensors. They certainly had him on instruments, but Jarrat was ex-Army. He was keenly aware that systems optimized for long-range engagements sacrificed close-range scan fidelity.

Another man might have taken to his heels in the seconds after the tractor bottomed out and the engines shut down, trying to put distance between himself and the monster. Jarrat ran also, but *toward* the tractor, into the cloud of dust and the dissipating heat-storm from the burned-out gravity resist generators. It was a sensor blind, and as he felt the first wave of heat parch his cheeks he knew he was off their screens.

He climbed the handholds, up the side of the machine toward the cab which peeked over the housings of the drill and geocannon like the bill of an absurdly small cap. The service ladder led up to the top of the cab, where crew entered through a circular hatch. Inside was a lock-in, lock-out chamber, from which one rode an elevator platform down into the cockpit. Jarrat was interested in none of this. He had only two targets, and he knew exactly where to place his shots.

Thin, desiccated air burned his lungs as he climbed, hurrying now, counting seconds. A wind out of the east plucked at his hair, tossed dust into his eyes as he made it up onto the roof of the cab and straightened his spine. He coughed as he turned about, and his first target was easy to pinpoint.

The comm array was just aft of the cab, the tractor's highest point. Jarrat leveled the Colt, and five rounds tore the aerials out of their mountings, threw them over the side in a whirling mass of scrap metal. The tractor was deaf and mute now. Signals for backup could not be sent, offers of aid would not be heard. Jarrat hoped he had knocked out the comm arrays before the advantage of stunned surprise wore off. If the backup call had already been made, life was about to become interesting.

He spared the twisted, shorted-out comm array mountings a bare glance, and turned swiftly toward his second target. With a dull click the Colt switched over to its auxiliary ammunition. He was firing hollow-nose incendiary rounds as he drew aim on the hatch's lock mechanism, and in seconds steel was replaced by bubbling marshmallow.

The hatch was the only way in or out of the tractor save for the escape pods, and he had already seen empty nacelles where they would have been when this vehicle was twenty years younger, and properly maintained. The men inside were imprisoned in their own machine, deaf, mute, crippled.

Now, Jarrat dared take a moment to catch his breath. He scanned the unfamiliar constellations visually, looking for sternflares, the wink of running lights, the flare-tails of a missile exchange, but only the three dwarf moons interrupted the blue-black of night. His own voice was harsh in his ears. "Stoney!"

If he opened himself to the rush of sensation, Stone was there —

Sweat prickling his ribs inside the pressure skin, the flicker of virtual instruments in the headup display while the Corsair spun in the sky like a dancer, pulse beating in his throat and temples, teeth clenched till his jaw ached as he dove and rolled, G-forces soaring painfully, making him struggle to remember why in any world he was doing this —

They came in out of the southwest, two aircraft that seemed to be formation flying, until the lead plane barrel-rolled, and looped up in a desperate effort to escape the hunter.

"Christ," Jarrat breathed, eyes wide, fixed on them as they raced toward him, losing altitude and apparently gaining speed with every kilometer. Jet noise echoed back off the hills, bounced between the ruins of Oromon's lethal corporate war and churned into an angry confusion.

For the life of him, Jarrat could not tell which was Stone, the hunter or the hunted. His heart was in his mouth as missiles launched, and a double sonic boom rolled over him. It shook his bones, jolted his senses as if a thunderbolt had grounded out beside him. Two super-bright engine flares leaped across the distance between the planes and Jarrat was not even breathing. The fugitive was one hell of a pilot. He stood the plane on its tail, threw her into a backbreaking arc over the hills and as a last resort lit the afterburners in a desperate attempt to outrun the missiles.

Jarrat had watched Stone pull the same maneuver. The wild skies of Calleran haunted him as he stood, feet braced, on the cab of the tractor and watched the missiles. In the battle over Calleran, Stone won. He brought the shuttle back to the *Athena* in one piece, filed the report which gutted the White Lightning syndicate and deliberately sank a bottle of bourbon, also while Jarrat watched. The maneuver was sound. It worked. If just enough time and space were on the side of the fugitive.

Not here, not now. Both missiles locked on the blazing afterburners and Jarrat's throat clenched as the fireball rolled over the godforsaken remains of Montevideo. It blossomed so close to the tractor, Jarrat barely had time to dive onto the roof of the cab before the wave of heat hit him. His fingers clenched into the handholds as the shockwave went over, and his voice was no more than a whisper in his ears as he screamed Stone's name.

Unlike a hundred other VM 104 missions they had flown in the last three weeks, this was no simulation. A pilot had just died, and Stone —

The hunter raced on into the dark and looped around hard, fast. Cameras would be running as he overflew the scene of the wreck and for a moment Jarrat was weak with relief. Stone's sensations barreled into him like a physical blow which gentled into a caress. Repulsion roared as the Corsair braked down. Powerful floodlights kicked in a moment before the public address bawled with Stone's voice, massively amplified, weird with echo distortion.

“Jarrat! Kevin, get down here, fast. We don’t have long, but we can make the run. I overflowed the facility five minutes ago. They launched everything they have, and now they’re spinning in the wind. Kevin!”

He was already moving, going down the handholds faster than he had climbed up. Twenty meters away, the Corsair touched down lightly in the rank grass of the rubble-strewn hill above the washaway, and Stone left the engines idling, the repulsion at eighty percent while the rear cockpit canopy whined up. Jarrat raised a hand to shield his eyes as he ran into the glare of the floods.

He went up the side of the 104 with the ease of much practice. For two weeks he and Stone had lived with these aircraft aboard the *Olympic*, and with 903 Squadron, Jack Brogen’s ‘Bad Company.’ He had learned no great love for Brogen’s people, but for the VM 104 Corsair, Jarrat had quickly acquired a deep respect. The fighter-interceptor was designed and manufactured not far from Chell, in the Rethan colony. It was smaller, faster, more agile and kicked much harder than the Yamazake *Daimyū* which had served as the space-to-surface shuttle aboard the *Athena* for the six years of her service life. Vincent Morello Aerospace were justifiably proud of their aircraft, and Rethan was already thriving on export credits and colonial dollars.

In the fore cockpit, Stone was helmeted and strapped-down tight. The featureless full-face visor turned toward Jarrat as he climbed in. As Jarrat settled the aft cockpit’s helmet on his head and plugged into the comm loop he heard the whisper of Stone’s breath in his ear, as close as a lover’s, and as intimate. Comm from the *Olympic* and 903’s radio chattered in the background, undercut by a sporadic murmur from the civilian bands, far below the military frequencies, but Jarrat was intent on Stone’s voice and ignored the rest.

“Jesus, Kevin,” Stone was saying. “You scared me spittleless.”

“You notice I’m in one piece,” Jarrat retorted. And then, “NARC Airborne to *Olympic* Control.” A bark, as harsh as his temper was short. “Brogan, goddamn it!”

The leader of 903 Squadron was some distance away, his radio torn and twisted by interference from the spaceport radars and the ECM which had been popped up by the Angel smugglers seconds after the *Olympic* launched. “Hold your water, NARC Airborne, we’re busy.”

“Busy?” Stone echoed. The Corsair was already in the air, kicking off in a storm of rubble-dust. “Brogan, you were supposed to be our backup! Where were you?”

“Right where I always am, watching the carrier’s ass,” Brogan told him sourly. “Tracking picked up a half-dozen missiles out of Montevideo, Stone. Where would *you* be?”

Anger rushed through Stone. Jarrat felt it so clearly, it might have been his own temper, but it was an unfocused wrath, equal parts frustration and cynicism, and it spent itself quickly. Brogan had his own priorities. The success of an unscheduled NARC special op was much lower on his list than the security of the carrier.

The Corsair plugged up into the night sky, and for the moment Jarrat sat

back for the ride. He watched the spaceport sprawl out below, a checkerboard of colored lights, automatic systems, cargo hangars, gantries, cranes. Less than twenty humans worked in an area the size of a small city. And at least one shift was in bed with the Montevideo Angel cartel, which worked in the wasteland between the cargo port and the Caucus Mountains, and shipped Angel out of Oromon in the guise of legit cargo, with kosher documentation.

“Vic Duggan would love to be here,” Stone said with rueful humor. He took the Corsair up around the navigation beacon on the crest of Mount Carlyne and then gave away altitude, putting himself under the tracking ceiling of the port radars. He cut a racetrack pattern over the city and back, coming up on the NARC observers’ coordinates.

The demolition order was signed by Colonel William Dupre himself, and if most of NARC had not been drydocked in the aftermath of the Equinox assignment it might easily have been the *Athena* or the *Huntress* in Oromon high orbit, and a gunship releasing four Saracen missiles into groundside coordinates pinpointed by an ‘obbo team’ who had invested almost three years in this mission.

Like Vic Duggan, they would have relished the sight as Stone’s missiles slammed into the target and erased it from the face of Oromon. The Angel lab went up in a white-gold firestorm, and Stone looped back around to capture video. The strike was surgically precise, even here. Three kilometers to the east were the spaceport outfields; two kilometers north and five hundred meters higher were the Starfleet comm relays on the forested shoulders of Carlyne and Josephine, and although the city of Montevideo was officially abandoned, it was far from deserted.

A shifting, always changing population of scavengers combed the ruins for ‘salvage.’ Several thousand civilians would have watched the Angel lab erupt like a new volcano in what had once been the Ranjit Sector — upmarket, trendy, in the days when Montevideo was the place to be, when vast industrial fortunes were being made ... and corporate war was never more than a whisker away.

Stone’s deep satisfaction reverberated through Jarrat’s nerves, almost a sexual sensation. “You enjoyed that,” Jarrat said, amused.

“I enjoyed that.” Stone was not about to apologize. “NARC Airborne to *Olympic* Control, we’re headed in. Recall your aircraft.”

“And send a cleanup crew,” Jarrat added. “You’ve got a construction tractor flat on its belly, right on top of my ditch-point. I disabled it, knocked out its repulsion and aerals, but you’ll get prisoners. I sealed the cab. Bring them in ... NARC’s going to want them.”

A moment’s stunned silenced echoed his words, and then Brogan was on the air. “You disabled a construction tractor? They’re freaking monsters, Jarrat.”

“I spent ten months of my life driving one of the goddamned things,” Jarrat said sourly. “I can show you how to dump one on its butt with a screwdriver. Knock it off, Brogan.” A note of warning sharpened his voice. He and Jack Brogan had been sparring since the moment he and Stone came aboard.

A routine training tour had become a minefield, and Jarrat's patience had worn thin.

"Leave it alone, Colonel," Stone said tersely. "I got most of it on long-range sensors while I was shaking the last of their pilots, and the rest on video when I picked him up. If you want to review the video, I'll authorize you to attend the debriefing."

Jarrat smothered a chuckle. Stone had assigned himself to the position of referee. He seemed to know Brogan from somewhere, but whatever the two shared in common, it was far in the past. And Jarrat doubted they had ever been comrades.

The Corsair was headed for orbit at a leisurely pace. He watched the spaceport dwindle below and pass over the terminator as the 104 headed into daylight. The visor darkened to mute the sunglare and Jarrat flexed his whole body, felt out his bruises, the small, passing injuries which always accompanied an action.

"You okay?" Stone cut them out of the external comm loop.

"Of course I am." Jarrat worked his shoulders around.

"You're hurting," Stone observed.

"So are you," Jarrat said sharply. "You pulled some G's so high, your bells are going to ring for a week."

"I'll live," Stone said with an old, familiar humor which mocked only himself. "I'm only doing what I love to do. Fly. They sent you out to do what you do best: take Target Alpha and pulp it."

"King shooter," Jarrat mused.

"You spent ten years building the reputation," Stone reminded him.

"And you took out the Angel lab."

"So you took the construction tractor instead," Stone said offhandedly. "That was quite a maneuver." He paused. "Brogen's going to hate you for it."

"Brogen," Jarrat muttered, "can screw himself. What's the deal with you two, anyway? You bloody know the man!"

"I *knew* him," Stone affirmed, but for a long moment he did not elaborate, and Jarrat felt his reluctance to go on. "College, Kevin. Before I dropped out, went over to Tac. Brogan was at Floyd Webber Polytechnic with me, class of '54. We ... weren't the model of comradeship, if that's what you're wondering."

"Rivalry?" Jarrat was watching the CRT at his elbow. The fat blip marking the position of the *Olympic* was coming up fast as Stone accelerated out of orbit. The Corsair shut back speed and Stone had just entered the 'lanes' around the big ship, waiting for landing advice, when a squad launched. The clean-up crew.

"Rivalry," Stone echoed. "We were kids, Kevin. He was taller, five months younger, better looking —"

"I'll be the judge of that," Jarrat told him.

Stone chuckled. "Thanks. But my family had money, remember. I was fast-tracked for the whole brilliant future at the time. Science and politics. Or they thought I was."

“Then came the bust-up,” Jarrat finished. He knew the story well enough. Stoney was still bruised. Some wounds went so deep, they never properly healed. “I want the bastards off the tractor, Stoney. I want them back on Darwin’s. Hand them to Intelligence. The cleanup crew just launched.”

“I saw.” Stone jinked the nose around. “Control is inviting us to land. Hold that thought.”

Like any carrier, the *Olympic’s* hangars were in the belly. Stone nosed up under the big ship like a tuna approaching a blue whale. He matched speed and then took his hands off, passed control to the AI to let the Corsair drift into the small, bright hangar and rotate to fit the slender docking space. Four other assorted aircraft docked after them, and Jarrat listened to the carrier’s comm loop, eavesdropping on ship’s business, until the hangar blew up to something resembling pressure.

The air was still freezing and Jarrat’s ears popped as the canopies went up. Stone was out before him, dropping to the black steel deck, limber, artlessly elegant in the silver-gray pressure skin. Only a few microns’ thickness of kevlex-titanium were needed to protect the human body from the ravages of vacuum, and the flexible ‘smart seal’ of the collar molded to the pad of the rebreather between his shoulders. Jarrat perched on the side of the cockpit, enjoying the simple pleasure of watching Stone stretch his back and shoulders, until the elevator growled open, and Jack Brogen’s face appeared.

He was taller than Stone by a hand’s span, and easily out-muscled him. The pressure skin outlined every bone, every sinew. On the left shoulder was the cartoon unit badge of ‘Bad Company,’ a scruffy youth of indeterminate gender in oversized buckle boots, with a smoking gun in each fist and a curl on his or her lip.

The 903 were arrogant. Jarrat was not at all sure they had earned the right to the arrogance. He looked Brogan up and down again as he stepped into the hangar, and knew his face must be set into a hard mask. Brogan was a natural blond, but he had added bronze streaks to his hair, which he wore in a braid, reminding Jarrat of Joe Ramos. Brogan was handsome, with the chiseled features of a carving in marble. Or ice. None of Stone’s warmth, his humor and humanity, showed in Brogan. The moment they came aboard, Jarrat had seen both Brogen’s good looks and the man’s chill. In the next moment he had lost interest, and he ignored 903 Leader when Stone called out, and tossed over the remote for their baggage trolley.

Brogen was glaring at Stone now, but his blue eyes flicked to Jarrat. “You’re wanted in the ops room. Some encrypted message just arrived. More NARC bullshit.”

“You don’t like NARC,” Stone observed.

“Give me a reason to.” Brogan was studying Jarrat rudely, as Jarrat came down the side of the Corsair by the hardpoints.

“What gets under Jack’s skin,” he said to Stone, levelly and ignoring Brogan, “is the question of authority. The chain of command. Starfleet’s asses are higher from the ground than everyone else’s ... and then we show up.” He caressed the NARC badge on the shoulder of his own pressure skin. “We show up and the chain of command goes all to hell.” He stepped away

toward the lift. "If the message came in encrypted, it's from Bill Dupre's office, which means it's important. Stoney?"

"After you." Stone turned his back on Brogan, and as the elevator closed over before him he said, "You could be right. In college, ol' Jack was your fundamental control freak. He took the routine, the discipline, just long enough to get where he wanted to be." Stone gestured vaguely. "Leader of a Starfleet intercept squadron. Top of the heap."

"Until NARC shows up," Jarrat added. "He looks at me like I'm the scum of the earth."

"He probably ran your file," Stone said quietly. "He has access, and he's the kind who'd stick his nose in. He knows where you're from."

Jarrat frowned at him. "So do you."

Stone only shrugged. "I'm not a social-climbing control freak. I have nothing to prove, Kevin, never had. And I have no score to settle with Sheckley. I've never even been there."

The elevator opened before Jarrat could comment. The carrier operations room was almost opposite, with an officers' lounge to one side, Tracking on the other, flanked by a double rank of pods, the escape modules serving this part of this deck. The ops room's wide doors were open; twenty screens flickered with a variety of data and Jarrat focused on the one displaying the course corrections and visuals for the tender that had gone out to recover the tractor crew.

The carrier's XO was a short, thickset man of Gene Cantrell's age, on whom the Starfleet fatigues looked uncomfortable. He gave Jarrat and Stone an ambiguous salute and pointed them to the work station in the corner, where the comm officer was absent, the system on auto. "Help yourselves. It's level three encryption, so I'll make myself scarce."

"Thanks, Paul." Jarrat liked the man. He and Stone had played poker with some of the carrier's specialists. They were not all like Brogan, and for this he was grateful.

"Coffee?" Paul Estevez offered.

"Thanks again." Stone swiveled out the comm officer's seat and parked himself in it. The message was waiting. He keyed in a nine-digit clearance code and leaned back to give Jarrat access to the keypad to do the same.

The physical closeness was taunting as Jarrat leaned in across him. He smelt the last of Stone's aftershave, the warmth of his skin as he opened the seal down the left side of the suit, and the angle of his chest appeared. Every instinct was to lower the shields they had deliberately built between them for the sake of efficiency if not sanity, and revel in sheer sensuality, perhaps a celebration of *life*. They had left Oromon unscathed, though the assignment had gone haywire.

Mocking himself for the impulse, Jarrat gave Stone a wink and mouthed the word *later*, before he reached over and tapped in his own security clearance. Stone choked off a chuckle and sat back, the better to see the screen.

As they had expected, William Dupre's face was framed in it. To his left, a column of data scrolled slowly, and they recognized the gist of their own report. A condensed version of the Equinox mission log. Almost all items had

been bulleted in green, which indicated the department's approval of their activities. But a few items were bulleted in red, and Jarrat muttered the kind of language that would have got his wrists slapped in the hospice where he had grown up.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Dupre said to the camera recording the briefing. "As you can see, I've appended a file for your attention, but the majority of the Equinox report was very straightforward. Several items remain to be clarified, but they're presently in the clutches of the legal department. Suffice to say, certain civil authorities in the city of Elysium are far from happy to have had the battle fought out in their jurisdiction! Lenore Maddigan, however, has attained complete political domination in the colonial government, and she is a powerful advocate for us.

"We've asked Colonel Duggan to come over to Darwin's to represent both Tactical and Maddigan's government, and I'm confident the legal wrangle will be settled in a few weeks. You may have to give evidence before the NARC Commission, Jarrat, Stone, but in my estimation it's a mere formality. A going-through-the-motions to keep the record straight. However, read the annotated Equinox file, familiarize yourselves with the questions which remain to be answered. You'll have plenty of time to review the Commission's concerns, and catch up with the *Athena's* business on the way over here.

"Effective immediately, you're recalled to NARC. The Starfleet courier *Persephone* is en route from Rethan." Dupre paused and looked aside to consult another screen. "We have an assignment for you. The *Athena* is still the most trustworthy carrier in the NARC fleet. She had her oars back in the water when the rest of us were still blinking, wondering what kind of bomb we were sitting on! So you'll be on assignment again sooner than you might have hoped."

He reached out of the frame with his left hand, touched a key, and the datastream in the side of the screen changed to a heavily-subtexted mission briefing. Jarrat barely glanced at it. The on-screen display was the tip of a mountain. Behind it would be terabytes of data, fifteen layers deep, making the synopsis deceptively simple.

In a glance, Jarrat saw the name of Aurora, and his teeth clenched. Stone was too close to him, and too finely attuned, not to feel the spark of tense reaction, quickly smothered. Aurora was the oldest of the Cygnus Colonies, and the richest. Sleeper ships had opened it up almost two centuries before, and for half that long it had been booming, first as a mine, then as a center of trade, shipping, the export of luxury *things* to the frontier and beyond. The more distant and harsh the colony world, the more people were willing to pay improbable prices for 'rare' extravagances. Goods which were deemed necessities in the so-called home colonies, the worlds closer to Earth and home.

Jarrat had never visited Earth, but a childhood spent on Sheckley was an education in the raw edges of the frontier. Like anyone who watched the newsvids occasionally, he knew Aurora had been getting rich for fifty years on the through trade to the mines, hell-worlds on the wrong side of the Cygnus Colonies. The capital was the spaceport city of Thule, and Tactical there had been squealing about Angel for months. Four weeks ago, while Jarrat and

Stone were filing the Equinox assignment report and taking a brief furlough before shipping out to the *Olympic*, NARC researchers entered the city of Thule to broadly verify Tactical's data.

"The colonial government of Aurora," Dupre was saying, "called for NARC following the submission of a Tactical dossier of massive proportions. Tactical Colonel Kris Janssen is waiting for your arrival at this time. From Darwin's World, the *Persephone* will transfer you directly to Aurora. The *Athena* is already there, gentlemen, running 'dark.' The colony is absolutely unaware of her presence, and Lieutenant Petrov is liaising with Colonel Janssen while performing preliminary data gathering. Janssen, incidentally, is the last generation of one of the original pioneer families.

"The so-called first families seem to believe the system is their own private property. They're taking their Angel problem as a personal insult. Thule has been almost paranoidly safeguarded, but in the end the rot has gotten in. The Angel syndicate which owns, body and soul, the city of Thule, is known locally as Scorpio ... and there, gentlemen, it gets complicated." Dupre's brows rose. "Study the file on your way here. We'll have more for you when you get in — and I'll fend off the NARC Commission as far as I can, for as long as I can. You have better ways to spend your time than repeating the same report over and over! I'll be expecting you, Jarrat, Stone. And the Oromon special op report."

Dupre reached out of the frame once more, touched a switch and vanished. The screen offered a selection of attached files, but for the moment Stone opted to download the whole thing to a datacube. Jarrat turned around, leaned on the back of Stone's seat and frowned at monitors until he saw a flight status board.

The courier *Persephone* was due to dock in a few minutes over four hours. Before he could grumble, Paul Estevez stepped back into the ops room with a mug in each hand, and slapped them down on the comm officer's work space.

"You done? Good news?" Estevez wondered.

"It never is." Stone buried his nose in the mug, tried the coffee, and made a face. "What the hell is this?"

"It's almost a philosophical question," Estevez warned. "It's synthetic, whatever that means." He gave the flight status board a nod. "Comm received signals from your courier. You're leaving. Back to Darwin's, and then on to some assignment. NARC bullshit, according to Brogan, but he's famous for talking through his ass."

"This time he's right," Jarrat said, amused. Estevez did not like Brogan much either. "What do you know about Aurora?" Stone was listening. The chair creaked as he swiveled it around and leaned back. Jarrat rested a hand on his shoulder, dealt him a companionable squeeze, and Stone stretched out his long legs. The skinsuit molded about him, creasing and arrowing in some fascinating directions. Jarrat averted his eyes and urged his attention back to business.

"Aurora. Now, there's a place to stay out of," Estevez said with a scornful curl of his lip. "My other half's brother works in Thule. I was out there myself,

looking at an apartment ... I got retirement coming up soon, on decent pay." He made a face and turned his attention to the curious liquid in his mug.

"So what's wrong with moving to Aurora?" Stone was honestly intrigued. Jarrat felt the prickle of his curiosity.

"Can't afford it, can I?" Estevez gestured at the ops room, and by extension, the carrier. "Twenty years in Starfleet, fifteen of them on active service, one side of the frontier or the other. Retirement on full pay. Sounds like a sweet deal to you?" He shook his head. "You take those credits to Aurora, you'll get a short-term lease on a packing crate. And it's ten below zero outside, in summer. Nice climate they got there." He finished the coffee and peered into the bottom of the mug. "No dregs. Now, how can you have coffee without dregs? Anyway, there's a lot of folks on Aurora who live rough, and they're Thule people, *born* and bred. They have Angel trouble now? What a surprise. The truth is, Thule's a grand place to live ... if you got the bucks. If not, the only way to survive is to get good and shit-faced and stay that way. The day comes when Angel looks attractive." And then Estevez flushed, realizing who, what, he was talking to. "Not that I'm in bed with the Angelpack, you understand."

"But you can see what would make a kid snort that crap," Stone said thoughtfully. He looked up at Jarrat, blue eyes wide, dark, thoughtful. "Old colony, big population, lousy climate, and if you don't have money —"

"Which most folks don't, and never will," Estevez said sourly.

"— you live rough, hard," Stone finished. He drained the coffee and passed the mug back to Estevez with one hand, while the other plucked the white metal datacube out of the machine. "Four hours, Kevin. You want to take a look at Dupre's file?"

"No," Jarrat said darkly, but he knew they would look at it anyway, at least the overview. The whole document would unfold in a millrace of video and stats after they boarded the *Persephone* for the thirty-hour flight to Darwin's. He stepped back to give Stone space. "Take care of yourself, Paul. Stay the hell out of Aurora, you and your better half."

"*Other* half," Estevez corrected glibly. "I'll watch out for you in the news-vids. You guys always make headlines."

The crew quarters were below and aft. Jarrat was silent as the lift went down, returning them to the small, cramped accommodations assigned to them for the training tour. They reminded him too strongly of the Army, and he gave the compartment a glare as he stepped inside. The door locked behind him, and a moment later he closed his eyes, smiled, as Stone's arms slid around him. Stone's chin rested on his shoulder, and Jarrat forcibly relaxed back into the bigger man's embrace.

"Don't let Jack Brogan get to you," Stone advised. He feathered a kiss around Jarrat's right ear. "He's a sonofabitch, but he's ... mostly harmless. Starfleet's full of guys like him. The service is a great way for a kid from the burbs to rise very high and do it while he's still young. Colonel by the age of thirty-five, if he's any good. Take the rank back into civvy street, score a job that'll put him in a penthouse on Darwin's, or right back on Earth. Think about it, Kevin. Leave the gutters of Rio or Saigon or wherever, return to

Earth as an executive. I don't like Brogan, but you have to respect the man."

"A social-climbing control freak, so you said." Jarrat turned in Stone's embrace, slid his arms around his partner's waist and laced his fingers at Stone's back. "What's that make me?"

"A survivor," Stone said without hesitation. "The only thing Brogan ever had to survive before he got out onto the frontier was mediocrity." He laid his lips on Jarrat's, kissed him lightly and then frenched him. "Enough about Brogan. If I never saw his face again, I wouldn't grieve. You, on the other hand ..."

With deft hands, he broke the seals and plucked open the skinsuit, a few microns of kevlex-titanium to hold pressure, lined with thermotex to hoard heat, laminated on the outer surfaces for radiation screening. Under normal cabin pressures the suits were soft as fabric, but much too hot. Jarrat's skin was sweat-damp and he made hedonistic sounds as Stone stripped him to the structured jockstrap which safeguarded his balls when the G-forces soared. Stone's eyes were hot on him, head to foot, and not at all mocking.

He heeled off the boots, kicked away the suit, and stepped into the shower stall. As the strap followed the boots he said, husky and not quite teasing, "Feel free to join me."

"You trying to tell me I stink?" Stone quipped. The seals on his own suit rasped open.

"Not the word I'd have used." Jarrat gave him a sultry look over his shoulder as he set the water, and watched Stone drop the suit. He was looking good. The ordeal at the hands of Death's Head was only a bad memory now. Stone was tanned, supple, his muscles well-worked, the inner man at peace with himself. Blue eyes lingered over Jarrat, bone by bone, and with a deep breath Jarrat 'opened' himself to the strange pleasures of another's sensations.

It was so familiar now, and welcome: the storm in the nerve endings, the surge of feeling which had once been confusing, distracting, even frightening. Jarrat's half-closed eyes rested on the dark nest of Stone's groin, and the thick root of him, rosy with growing excitement. They had been too cramped, kept too busy and under too much pressure since they came aboard to be intimate.

The stresses of another assignment were due to begin in a matter of hours, and Jarrat was keenly aware of Stone's desire to make the most of what little time they could get. In these few hours, before the *Persephone* docked, they were technically on their own time. They had closure on the Oromon mission, they had officially been recalled from the training tour, yet the Aurora assignment was still no more than a file to view, data to digest.

"Take what you can get," Stone said quietly as he stepped into the shower stall. Two large bodies in the stall made for close quarters. His arms wound around Jarrat.

"They own us," Jarrat growled. "I have a habit of forgetting."

"Not for the next few hours," Stone argued. "When we go aboard the courier on Dupre's orders, we're on his time. Till then ..."

"Take," Jarrat echoed, "what you can get."

And he twisted in the small space, slithering down Stone's warm, wet body to rest his cheek against the flat plane of his Stone's belly. Abs rippled,

crisp hair tickled Jarrat's ear and then his lips. He smiled as Stoney groaned, low and deep in his chest, and the flood of sensation rolled through both of them like warm honey. Jarrat's lips parted. He breathed across Stone's hard, risen shaft and took the gasp as a kudo. The flashfire of Stone's excitement thrilled through him, bringing him so close to the edge, his teeth clenched and the breath fluttered in his throat.

"Kevin," Stone groaned. "Damnit, Jarrat!"

It might have been a warning; it was the last coherent sound in the tiny cabin for some time.

CHAPTER TWO

The NARC dock at geostationary above Venice was so congested with ships, Stone had never seen a logjam like it. Two carriers, eight tenders, six engineers' tugs and several score smaller hulls were docked in strict order, picked out in colored floodlights and spinners, forming a corona about the kilometer-long spindle shape of the dock itself.

And in their turn even the big ships were dwarfed by the troll-ugly shape of the fleet tender, the *Mitsubishi Aerospace Osaka*. According to the public newsvids, it had arrived from the port of Kure four days before. Stone whistled as the courier maneuvered in through the jumble. It looped high over the back of the *Osaka* and down again into what seemed to be a crevasse between its mountainous side and the flank of the dock itself, which offered the last available hangar.

"Will you look at that. When's the last time you saw a fleet tender out here?"

"Never." Jarrat's voice was quiet. "If you hang out long enough in a place like Sheckley you'll see almost everything sooner or later. But this?" He moved closer to Stone's shoulder and ducked down, the better to see the *Osaka* as the Starfleet pilots spun the *Persephone* inside her own length to fit her stern-first into the hangar.

The instrument lights painted his face green down one side, red down the other, and lit witchfires in his eyes. Stone rested a hand on Jarrat's back, rubbed him there absently, unaware of the small mark of affection until Jarrat angled a smile at him.

Nothing in Stone's memory came close to the situation faced by all the deep space services in the aftermath of the Equinox assignment. Almost every ship carried Equinox components. Various levels of panic continued to reverberate like aftershocks through Starfleet, the Army, even NARC itself, though they at least had their 'oars back in the water,' as Dupre had put it. McKinnen and Budweisser were going to be kept busy for some time to come, with more

than a hundred ships on the NARC roster alone to be gutted and made over. Made safe.

The hangar doors closed before the immensity of the *Osaka*, and Stone shook himself. The courier pilots were eager to shut down and get out of the dock. They had forty-eight hours' R&R coming, and their plans included a concert and an all-nighter at some place in downtown Venice. Stone had never heard of it. He and Jarrat had spent too little time here lately to know Darwin's World well any more. Like any city, the face of Venice changed constantly.

Listening to the pilots' chatter as they left the courier, Jarrat made a pained expression. They were headed for a den called Cocktails, and predictably, he knew it at least by reputation. At Stone's raised brow he said, "It's a VR den, exactly like it sounds. Dope, toys and piped-in designer fantasy till you just can't play anymore."

"You ever been there?" For an instant Stone was haunted by one of his own fantasies, and he felt a rush of heat in his face as he remembered, belatedly, Jarrat had shared them.

The gray eyes sparkled with rueful humor. Jarrat gave him a look, heavy-lidded, unashamedly carnal, as they shouldered through the hatch and stepped out into the ice-cold, breezy air of a gunmetal hangar. He zipped the brown leather jacket and thrust his hands into his pockets. "Once or twice."

"Any good?" Stone punched for an elevator and they waited, aware of the time, the shuttle schedule, and the *Persephone's* late arrival.

"Depends," Jarrat said darkly.

"On what?" Stone knew he was being teased, but it was a gentle mockery.

"If VR's the best you can get," Jarrat told him, "Cocktails is a hell of a place to burn a week's wages in a night. If," he added, "VR's the best you can get." And he lifted his brows at Stone, an expression filled with a heady mix of suggestion and invitation.

At last Stone laughed, but before he could make any glib remark the lift opened and a bevy of techs in Starfleet coveralls stepped out. They would be working on the *Persephone* until she left. She was troubled by some problem with the electronics, the very reason the courier was an hour late. Stone looked at the time and swore.

"They'll hold the shuttle." Jarrat stepped into the elevator. "They know we're on the platform."

And William Dupre wanted them both in the NARC facility outside Venice, promptly. The next scheduled shuttle flight was not for six hours. Stone relaxed, shoulders against the metal wall as the lift went up fast, headed for the very apex of the dock.

Jarrat was right. The shuttle was holding, its crew obviously annoyed, its other passengers more curious, as Stone went aboard a pace ahead of Jarrat and dumped his bag in the nearest overhead. They were still strapping down when the clamps released, and Jarrat swore softly as the transport in NARC livery turned its tail toward the platform.

Ahead and below, the globe of Darwin's World was blue-green, wearing a frosting of cloud through which Stone easily picked out the coastline and

the peninsula where Venice was cradled by low hills. He settled back, closed his eyes. Riding as a passenger had never appealed to him. He might have slept, but Jarrat was restless. He swiveled out the comm access and logged onto a news channel, looking for anything to pass the time.

Not quite surprisingly, stories from Thule featured among the mundane domestic reports from Darwin's, Avalon, Mars, Earth. Rumors of NARC involvement in a city's business always made headlines, and the Angelpack was already on the street. Stone's lips compressed as he watched a windmilling crowd in the confines of a mall, flanked on all sides by Tactical. The news camera captured the exact moment when someone began to shoot. A Tac officer was picked up by a heavy round and spun into a storefront. Glass shattered, panic erupted on both sides and the street exploded into chaos.

"Damn," Jarrat whispered. "They need a gunship."

"Not while the carrier's running dark." Stone regarded the scene sourly. "We're going to be right in the middle of that in a few days."

"Don't remind me." Jarrat flipped channels to get rid of the Aurora story and frowned at an excerpt from some dance show. Eight young men in body paint and little else, apparently enacting a battle scene. After the images from Thule, the ballet appeared simply trite and Jarrat flipped channels again, still restless, impatient to bury the Equinox job and get his teeth into the Aurora assignment.

With a curious resignation, Stone closed his eyes and waited to feel the buffet of reentry. Against the odds he was dozing, and William Dupre's voice took him by surprise. He peeled open his eyes to see that Jarrat had accepted a call. Dupre's face had replaced the meaningless domestic news stories in the palm-sized screen.

"Stone's associate arrived on the last clipper," Dupre was saying. "We hadn't expected him here so soon, but President Maddigan pulled some strings, got him aboard some kind of government sub-charter. I'm pleased to have Colonel Duggan on Darwin's ... his testimony will muzzle the dissenters."

"Dissenters?" Jarrat echoed.

"Vic's here?" Stone asked at the same moment, pushing upright in the seat and knuckling his eyes.

"As I said, he got in on the *Taipei*. Good evening, Captain," Dupre said, amused, his eyes shifting to Stone. "And you could expect dissenters in the Elysium business and industrial community. I imagine every soul on Avalon was delighted to see the Angel trade curtailed, but I was far from astonished when the screaming began. You turned their fair city into quite the battlefield, and reduced a lot of it to rubble."

"Not us," Jarrat rasped. "Equinox picked the field and Randolph Dorne himself opened the engagement."

Dupre only smiled faintly. "I'm aware of that, Captain ... Jarrat, take a deep breath. The NARC Commission is not about to censure you or Stone. Not after the decisive nature of your action, and certainly not after you discovered the extent to which Equinox Industries had extended its tentacles into every branch of the service. They just want to do the dotting and crossing, answer the dissenters and close the file." The smile widened. "Humor them.

You're due to make your final testimony tomorrow. Till then, relax. Avail yourself of the facilities." He paused, looking back at Stone. "You ran the Aurora file?"

Stone felt his face set into a mask. "Someone told us not long ago, Aurora is a place for staying the hell away from."

"Unless," Jarrat added, "you're credits up to the eyeballs, with colonial dollars stuffed up both sleeves."

The NARC Quadrant Controller actually chuckled. "Yes, well, in the field you'll be riding a department expense account." His dark eyes glittered in the bright camera light. "Try to remember, I *do* get audited."

"We'll bear it in mind," Stone assured him gravely, and Dupre cut the link. "Riding," he intoned, in a fair approximation of Dupre's rich Barbadian accent, "the department's expense account." He rubbed his palms together.

"Dupre'll probably audit us as well," Jarrat warned.

"A month after the fact," Stone argued, "besides which, anything we get up to is strictly in the line of business."

"Business." Jarrat's brows rose. "Now, there's an elastic concept that stretches to fit almost any contingency."

Stone dropped his right hand on Jarrat's lean thigh and squeezed him there in agreement, just as the transport began to buck the turbulence of the upper atmosphere and the repulsion kicked in hard.

Two hours later, as the sun pooled in crimson over the Venice skyline, they stood in the humid heat of a rooftop landing bay. From four kilometers inside the perimeter of the NARC compound, they watched the tail lights of the departing Chevrolet *Celeste* that had brought them in from the port. Familiar constellations winked overhead between serried banks of cloud which promised equatorial storms by midnight.

"Home again, home again," Stone was conscious of an uncertain emotion, and Jarrat frowned at him. Kevin was much too sensitive to what he felt to be unaware of Stone's ambivalence.

"Home?" Jarrat moved closer. His arm snaked about Stone's waist. They were at a parapet on the east side of the building, and before them the NARC exclusion zone — the testing and training range of the Venice facility — was as vast, dark and featureless as the city of Venice itself was bright and garish.

Stone could only shrug. "This place is as near to home as any other." He leaned into Jarrat's side and took the opportunity to press a kiss to his ear before the duty sergeant appeared to clear their ID. "I like Venice. It reminds me of Barcelona."

"Where?" Jarrat turned toward him, elbows on the parapet.

"A place in Spain. Earth," Stone elaborated. "I used to fly ultralites in the mountains northwest of there, when I was a kid."

"I remember." Jarrat splayed his hand on Stone's chest, over the slow, heavy beat of his heart. "You should do it again. Ultralites."

"Maybe." Stone closed his hand over Jarrat's, holding it against him. His

mouth was almost on Jarrat's when a low rumble of hydraulics announced an Internal Security officer, and they stepped apart.

It was Jon Chan. Even in the half-light, at a glance Stone knew the freckles and the carrot-orange hair in the tight-drawn pony tail. Chan was ex-Tactical, just a year out of the service, and still over-conscious of the NARC badges on his shoulders. But he had known Jarrat and Stone since the weeks they had spent here under Yvette McKinnen's thumb, and he moved aside to give them access to the security elevator without even a routine blink at their ID.

"Your baggage arrived, Cap Jarrat." Chan jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "They put you in 927 again. You want I should get you a move someplace? I can do that tonight."

"927 is fine." Jarrat's eyes remained on the last flush of sunset until the lift closed over. "Where did they put Vic Duggan?"

"The colonel from Elysium Tac?" Chan's brow creased. "I'll find out and give you a buzz. Which reminds me, Doctor Del asked me to pass along a message. His compliments, and if you haven't had dinner, he's eating in the lab tonight, you're invited. He has some numbers you need to see ... or something like that." The young man flashed Stone a grin. "Beats hell out of me what he does in that lab."

"Good. It's classified way over your head," Stone told him dryly. He angled a speculative look at Jarrat. "You want to go right there? My stomach was expecting breakfast, but the details are negotiable."

"Sure." The lift had slowed, and Jarrat waited only long enough for Chan to step out before he punched for the high-security labs.

Even here, in the heart of NARC's own domain, the classified projects were buried three floors under the building, beneath the nuke bunker and armory. Harry Del hated the whole security deal, but since his work had come to the notice of both the NARC hierarchs and the political quarter, from which the department's funding originated, he was out of options.

Left to his own devices, Stone knew Harry would have worked on the beach in front of his house over in Venice's Fairview sector, and cultivated his redesigned tropical fungi in glass houses in the yard. The chances of NARC or the governments of Darwin's World or any of the homeworlds letting Del wriggle off their hook were subzero. For the past seven weeks he had worked in a lab so secure, he had to palm his own locks to get in, a guard accompanied him every time he left the NARC compound, and access to his work was restricted to only a handful of people, even within NARC.

Two of those whose access was automatic were Jarrat and Stone. They were intrinsic to the project. In many ways they *were* the project, and they had been briefed when Del's work was kicked up from level three clearance to level nine. At such stratae of security, only a few NARC captains, a handful of very senior politicians, William Dupre himself, and a small group populated by specialists like McKinnen, could walk into the lab unchallenged, or read a word Harry Del wrote.

The secrecy was a constant source of aggravation to a man who prized his freedom, privacy and personal liberty above all else. For decades he had

hidden himself away in the lush, high valleys around Ballyntyre, and if not for Jarrat and Stone he would still have been there. So would Tansy, Malcolm and the other members of Harry's big, extended family. Stone sighed as he stepped into the lab, a pace behind Jarrat. The door guard had passed them through into a brightly-lit cavern where the loudest sound was a shush of cooling fans from the plethora of machines. Stone suppressed a smile as he viewed the man's clutter, and the man himself.

The jeans were as battered as ever, the oversize shirt just as loud, and Harry was barefoot. He looked like a dropout from a post-grad study program. The truth was so distant from the impression, Stone indulged himself in a smile.

The whiteboard opposite the door was a jumble of holosnaps, leaving little space for notes. He recognized Tansy and some of the kids, and looked closer. In the background was a city extending to the horizon under a gold smog layer. It certainly wasn't Chandler or Ballyntyre, and a question hovered on his lips. He didn't need to ask it.

Harry may not have been any kind of telepath, but he could read Stone's emotions, or Jarrat's, from the other side of Venice. On Rethan the locals called people like him 'queer.' Stone would have called him a magician. As Jarrat appeared, Del looked him over with the critical eye of the neurosurgeon, the microbiologist — the empath — but he said to Stone by way of greeting,

"They're still in Eldorado. I've asked Tan a dozen times to pack up, corral the younger kids even if Malcolm and the others won't move, and get over here. But she won't leave South Atlantis. I don't think she's been offworld in her entire life."

"And you wish you were home," Stone added.

"And ... I wish I were home." Harry had been working at a massive microviewer. He turned off the display and leaned on the bench. "Good Christ, will you look at this? It's a bloody *dungeon*! There's criminals in prison who have more freedom."

"And it's my fault," Jarrat said, not unexpectedly. He flicked a dark glance at Stone, as if challenging him to argue, but Stone only shrugged. Jarrat was right in too many ways. "All this," Jarrat added with a glare at the lab, "started when I sent you Tim Kwei. Jack Spiteri was a routine fix-up, like I was the first time around. But Tim ..."

"Tim," Stone said quietly, "was like me."

An Angelhead. An old dreamhead, dopehead, floating in a heaven-and-hell world of his own making, marking time until the last dream of all sent him slipping into Angeldeath. Rapturous, exultant, joyous. Terminal. For a moment it seemed barbed wire bunched around Stone's heart. He would never completely cast off the memories, but he had learned how to hammer them into perspective, shut them back in the dark corners of his mind, where they would lurk until next time.

A deep frown creased Harry's brow as he regarded the younger man. "How are you Stoney? And don't try to lie to me."

"I'm good," Stone told him honestly. "The VM-104 was a lot of fun to

fly, we got out of the Oromon assignment without much more than a bruise — you heard about that? — and they're sending us to Aurora. I could wish for a few days' vacation, but you can usually screw a few perks out of this job along the way."

"Aurora." Del made a face. "They're in the news too much."

"Their government's making a lot of noise," Jarrat agreed. "We read the whole file on the way over here. You ever been there, Harry?"

"No," Del said musingly, "but I might be making the trip soon."

Stone's ears pricked. "I thought NARC had you nailed down with work right here. After the job you did with Tim Kwei, you're the hottest property they own. Pardon me, *think* they own."

"They can think whatever amuses them," Harry said on an uncharacteristically sour note, not at all like him. His good nature was stretched by the confinement, along with his equanimity. "I only did for Tim what I did for you, Stoney. Tim didn't need a cushion, a distraction, the way you did. He didn't get himself into any kind of empathic bond, but I'll tell you, Jesse Lawrence offered."

"I thought he would." Jarrat drew one hand slowly back through his hair, tousling it. "Damn. Now the buggers have seen you do it a second time, they know it wasn't a fluke. There was no luck involved. You can take a brain that's gotten scrambled and ... straighten it out. Whatever. And when the kid wakes up —" His eyes were on Stone, dark, probing.

"The kid wakes up clean," Stone said softly, "and the next time some bastard forces Angel up his nose, all he does is sneeze." Not all his willpower would prevent the shudder, and he knew Jarrat felt it. A muscle twitched in his jaw, betraying grinding teeth. "So how's Tim?"

The look on Harry's face was thunderous. "See for yourself," he invited, and siveled a monitor around to face them. "I want you to know, I protested officially. They would have gone ahead without me, so I agreed to be there, though I absolutely refused to participate."

A note in his voice made Stone's skin crawl. Jarrat picked up on his creeping premonition and looked sharply at him, and Stone cleared his throat. "I thought Tim Kwei was writing VR games now. Jack Spiteri told us, before we shipped out to join the *Olympic*, he's doing project design for NARC. The last we heard of Jesse, he was dancing, not hustling. He had some great booking in an uptown club."

Harry's dark head nodded. In the overhead fluoros his eyes looked hollow. "I discharged the three of them from medical care not long after the Equinox bust. And incidentally, congratulations to the two of you on that score. Don't take any crap from the NARC Commission. Vic Duggan got in a while ago, and he's carrying a release from President Maddigan, sanctioning the Elysium action. Bill Dupre briefed you?"

"He mentioned something about it," Jarrat said evasively. "Harry, the NARC big-wheels'll keep. What's this about Tim Kwei?"

"More NARC big-wheels." Harry gestured at the widescreen display in which was framed an image of Tim, sitting in the corner of another lab. It might, Stone thought, have been McKinnen's laboratory, a room both he and

Jarrat had come to know too well, while one of them made a simulated run and the other floated in the isolation tank, monitoring him as no machine ever could. Harry thumbed the remote and let the playback begin. "I know *exactly* what they have in mind, Jarrat, and I don't like any of it."

The video was high quality, from the lab's mobile recorder. Tim Kwei was a little pale, watchful, cautious. He gave the camera an anxious look, but someone was talking to him, out of the angle of view. Stone did not know the voice, but it belonged to a man: "Mister Kwei, we're grateful for your willingness to participate in this experiment. NARC appreciates your input."

"Okay." Tim was hesitant. For the third time in two minutes he recrossed his legs, and his arms were folded tightly. His eyes focused outside the frame. "I mean, it's okay, isn't it, Doctor?"

And then Del's voice: "It's unethical, Tim. It may not be dangerous, but professionally I'd call the procedure wicked. If you want to change your mind right now, I'll back you up. Don't feel forced into it. And don't," he stressed, "go ahead with this because you feel you owe a debt, either to me or to NARC. You *don't*."

The young man's mouth compressed. The camera zoomed on his face as he said awkwardly, "They said it would be valuable data."

"No doubt," Del agreed in acid tones, "they want to see proof. They're pressuring you, and me, to provide them with something they still can't quite believe, though they've read Stone's official report."

The Equinox report? "Christ," Jarrat whispered, and swore beneath his breath as Stone's marrow cooled by several degrees. On the monitor, Tim took a long deep breath and at last nodded his assent for the 'procedure' to go ahead.

A lab tech entered the frame and stood with his back to the lens while he set up sensors to monitor Tim. On the corner of a bench at Tim's elbow was a small box, security tagged, color-coded with yellow chevrons. Haz-mat, Stone observed, and realized he was holding his breath as the demonstration went ahead.

"Stoney." Jarrat stepped closer to him.

"I'm okay." Stone was intent on the screen, unable to look away.

The side of the screen streamed data now: Kwei's vital signs. He was healthy but nervous, tense. Heart, respiration, every sign elevated as he opened the box and took out an object both Stone and Jarrat recognized all too easily. Any dopehead on the street would have known it. A twenty-credit 'pop,' enough Angel to keep the user in a state of euphoria for another eight or twelve hours, depending on his body weight and how far along he had progressed in his addiction.

With a surreal fascination Stone watched as Kwei brought the little plastic bubble to his face, and the kid's eyes squeezed shut. How many times had this been done to him ... and later, had he done it for himself, before Jesse Lawrence could find him? Before Jarrat could make a headlong dive into a club called Palomino and pull him out.

The capsule burst under pressure with an unmistakable popping sound. Tim held his cupped hands to his face and his chest heaved once, twice, as

he breathed it in. Offscreen, Harry Del muttered something that could have been profanity, and in the side of the frame the vital signs leapt in reaction to Tim's sudden panic attack.

But not to the first stages of the Angel 'ride.' Stone watched the numbers as if they mesmerized him. Heart, BP and respiration were soaring, but the hormones, the brain chemistry, remained stable. A timer in the lower right of the monitor was counting seconds. Just over a minute after he had inhaled the full dose, Kwei gave a vast sneeze, and then another, and his stats began to slither back to normal levels.

Stone had his own memories: an office high in Equinox Towers — a man called Strother, John D., who did not actually exist; Randolph Dorne, and Kjell Wozniak. And words branded into the roots of his brain. No matter how he tried to shut them off, they played back in his subconscious, over and over. He wondered fleetingly what gremlins haunted Jarrat's sleep as he heard Randolph Dorne again —

The only weapon you leave me is fear. Picture yourself a ten credit fuck in a laborers' sex shop on Eos. I've traded men like pieces of meat. There are ways and ways to die. I'm sending you to a bordello in Orlando. You'll be glad to talk in exchange for comfort —

"Stoney." Jarrat's hand clenched into his shoulder, bruisingly hard. "Stoney!"

He jerked himself out of the well of memory to find Harry Del peering closely at him while Jarrat's hands had become clamps on his arms, and the brush of Jarrat's feelings on his own was a welcome caress. He turned to it like a plant to the light. "I'm all right," he lied.

"You're not," Del said mildly.

"He will be," Jarrat whispered. "We all have our ghosts, Harry. But if you let Central know they haunt you, it's another psyche evaluation, three months early."

"Bugger," Del agreed. "If it's any consolation to you Stoney, you're human. If you felt nothing ... which may be what the NARC shrinks want ... I'd be worried about you. And this?" He gestured at the screen, where the image of Tim Kwei was frozen again. "The 'experiment' was so far against my wishes, Bill Dupre and I had an argument you could hear all over this building."

"Tim was okay afterward?" Jarrat asked shrewdly.

The empathic healer turned off the monitor and perched on the side of the desk. "Physically, sure. But it was stressful, and the crap is still in his bloodstream, like poison. It'll cycle out over the space of a month or so in sweat and urine, but it's — what did Eve Lang call it?"

"Potted pigshit," Jarrat said with a bitter, dark humor. "You keep in touch with her, Harry?"

But he shook his head. "Not from this *dungeon*. It takes me all my time to get a call out to Tan and my kids, and then half the time I don't get their messages back."

"And it's our fault," Stone said flatly.

"Mine," Jarrat corrected. "I took you to Harry when I got you back from

Death's Head. And I sent Tim to him, which made NARC realize what they've got their claws into. Right, Harry?" He raised a brow at Del. "They wanted to see the proof, right here under their cameras and sensors. Because they want a whole lot more."

The healer looked away with a faint sigh. "Bill Dupre told me, the senior echelon as far away as Earth want me to perform the procedure on other field agents like yourselves, who are often at risk of exposure to Angel. I would make them immune. And along the way they want a corps of agents on the street who can track and monitor each other the way you two do." He hopped down off the bench and thrust his hands into the pockets of the baggy jeans. "I see their point, of course. The worst of it is, I do understand their position!"

"But everything you do ... everything you *are*," Stone said slowly, "is being perverted into a weapon of some kind."

"Exactly." Del shook himself visibly. "Been here, done this, Stoney. When I was a kid I was dumb enough to get into some harebrained research projects. I'd been ostracized at college, med school, and I guess I wanted to prove I wasn't 'queer,' when the truth is, I am. All the Rethan mutations are. But it's a *good* kind of weird. I'm a healer, I've always helped and fixed and mended." He gestured at the screen, where the last image of Kwei was juxtaposed with the young man's data. "Now they want me to go inside healthy brains and meddle, to make your deep cover agents Angel-immune." He looked darkly at Jarrat. "I've told them fifty times, I need something to key on. I have to see where I'm going, I need a route map before I can start cross-wiring, patching, jury-rigging, in a man's brain! You know what this means?"

The concept made Stone shiver, and Jarrat felt the rush of his horror. "It means," Kevin said very quietly, "the subject — the field agent, and it could be myself — volunteers for Angel addiction."

"Advanced, chronic addiction," Del corrected. "You have to give me something solid to work with, or I won't stand a chance." He looked away, rubbing his face hard enough to leave his cheek and jaw ruddy. "I'm a healer, even a queer, but not a magician. I can't seem to get this through the minds of the bastards who are trying to pull my strings."

Jarrat was frowning over the image of Tim Kwei. "You've fixed two terminal dreamheads," he mused. "They can't see any further. Stoney's better than he ever was, and Tim's fine."

"But I can't guarantee results," Del rasped. "Understand, Jarrat. Every individual is different, every brain is as unique as ... as a man's soul. Christ! I'm not tinkering with used cars here! If I make a single mistake I can kill as easily as cure. My work is more of an art than a science. There are no guarantees. There can't be any. I'm not a machine, and the patients I work with are human, not mechanisms. You want fucking AI drones, call Yvette McKinnen!"

"Harry," Stone began, but Del was oblivious.

The healer squeezed shut his eyes. He looked as tired, disillusioned, as he had appeared relaxed and content at home ... at a place that no longer existed, Stone reminded himself as Harry said, "They're pressuring me to try it,

and goddamn it, Stoney, they've recruited themselves a volunteer."

A muscle in Jarrat's gut tightened. Stone felt it clearly. "Who?" Kevin asked.

"You know Janine Cruz?" Harry pushed away from the desk. "I promised you dinner, didn't I?"

"I know Janine." Stone traded feelings of unease with Jarrat. "She was kicked up to captain while Kevin was in deep cover in Chell."

"Captain Janine Cruz," Del said, marching to the bench at the rear of his lab, where an autochef, a refrigerator and a boom box had been installed, "was short-listed for the experimental program. Which probably means she's still 'provisional.' Yet to prove she's worth the rank, or some such crapola."

"She's good," Stone mused. "Hasn't she just been partnered with Scott Auel? It went through when I was buried in Warlock Company."

"And they'll be a good team," Jarrat added. "They're still waiting for a carrier, and five months isn't long enough to prove you can hold your own in this line of work. Sometimes the opportunity to show Central your best stuff doesn't come along. Then your partner makes the next deep cover run, and you sit on your ass in orbit, keeping the paper clips counted." He shook his head. "Or maybe Cruz screwed up somewhere. We all do, occasionally."

"Whatever." Del punched for steak, salad and a baked potato, and stood aside to give Stone access to the 'chef. "Cruz was short listed for the project, and the moron agreed."

Stone read the 'chef's menu and chose the cajun tuna and rice. As he stood aside to let Jarrat see the list he said to Harry, "Cruz must have read your file. She trusts you. Your skill."

"Then she's a damned fool," Del said tartly. "She has no idea how I work, what I do, and *don't* do. And I appreciate, she's only as good as her information. Nobody bothered to tell her, the procedure itself could kill her ... or I can fail, and leave her just as I found her. A chronic Angel addict with a few months left to live." Harry's big arms closed around his own chest, hugging himself. "I won't do it, and I've *told* them I won't, but they don't seem to be listening. Nothing I say will stop them. So Janine Cruz is going to show up here, stoned out of her skull, but it won't be a job like Tim. It'll be like it was for you, Stoney."

"Jesus," Stone whispered. "I remember it all, Harry." He swallowed on the lump in his throat and was not surprised when Jarrat stepped closer, slid an arm about him. "The work almost killed me."

"It would have," Harry told him sourly, "if Jarrat hadn't been there to be your buffer against me. Now, Cruz and Auel don't have anything remotely like the bond of affection you two share. They may sleep together but they're not in love, never were, never will be." He took a covered plate from the 'chef. His brows rose, creasing his high forehead. "If I asked Scott Auel to do for her, Jarrat, what you did for Stoney ..." He made negative noises. "You recall Yvette McKinnen's righteous protests, during the tests before you were assigned to Avalon?"

As if they were likely to forget, Stone thought, making a face. He lifted his own meal out of the 'chef, and it reset itself for Jarrat's kebabs and

noodles. "She tried her damndest to prove we were unstable, headed for the funny farm."

"Empaths are a thousand times more common than telepaths," Del intoned, "and only a comparative handful of them are emotionally stable enough to hold onto their sanity for long. And as for empathically bonded individuals, like the two of you? There's only love makes it bearable. I finally got this through to Yvette and Bill Dupre. They understand, but the old farts in charge of this department don't. They want to put Cruz in your place, Stoney, without the backup. Him." He nodded at Jarrat. "Scott Auel's a good guy, but even if he goes through with it, accepts the empathic bond, to drag Janine out of hell, those two will be at each other's throats in a week. The whole point of the project is to conjure a field agent who's Angel-immune ... and a partnership where one partner can monitor the other without devices, implants, biocyber or otherwise." He shook his head. "They'll end up assigning Scott and Janine to ships a sector apart, before they kill each other, and you're right back to square one! *If*," he added bitterly, "I don't make any slightest mistake and land the stupid woman in the morgue. Or in a hospice, waiting to die."

Jarrat and Stone shared a heavy sense of dread. Many research scientists would not have hesitated to involve themselves in the project. If the price of the experiment was the life of a volunteer, or several, the results more than justified the cost. But Del was a healer and an empath. With a blaze of insight Stone saw his position. In Del's eyes, the project could easily, perhaps inevitably, make him into a murderer. For a man who had invested many years in the search for a cure for Angel, the proposition was bitter indeed.

"We should have expected it," Jarrat was saying as he took his plate to the lab's small lounge, swept datacubes and document files off the table and pulled up a chair. "R&D, and Intelligence are always prowling, looking for new weapons. God knows, their antennae went up fast enough when they got wind of Stoney and me." He frowned at Stone across the table. "I'm sorry, Harry. We should have warned you. NARCs can be sonsofbitches, from the top down ... we have the rep, and we earned it. Sometimes NARCs get caught in our own rat traps."

"Like you two." Del was eating, intent on the food. "They had Yvette put you through the meat grinder. At the time, I expected you to slap your resignation down on Bill's desk and walk out." He looked up at them over the well-done steak. "As I intend to."

Surprise ambushed Stone. "You're quitting?"

"If they'll let me," Harry growled. He pushed his food around the plate and sat back. "I'd quit in an instant if I could go home, but there's nothing to go back to yet."

"The reconstruction?" Jarrat guessed.

"Takes time." With his steak knife Harry gestured at the whiteboard, and the dozen or more pictures of the old plantation. "They won't be done for ten months, minimum. Besides which, it's still too dangerous for Tan and the kids to show their faces. We agreed to give Eldorado Tac a year to tie up their loose ends, chase down the Death's Head runners, lowlife like Joel Assante

and his lover, the bastard Angel courier who turned up dead in Bally.” He sighed heavily.

“Give Eldorado Tac the chance to do their job,” Stone suggested.

“I will. Like I have a choice.” Harry sat back and pushed away the plate. He had barely touched the steak. “But it doesn’t mean I have to stay in this frigging dungeon for a year, performing butcher-jobs on kids like you and Jarrat, who were perfectly healthy until they volunteered to shove Angel up their noses!” Anger made his eyes brighten. “I’ve had the proverbial better offer.”

Curiosity diverted Stone from his meal. “From a medical institute? It can’t be anything like NARC’s project. Your work here is so classified, it’s the reason they’ve got you cooped up in a basement!”

But Harry’s wide shoulders lifted in a shrug. “It’s classified, but you’d be surprised who has the clearance, and where.”

“A while ago,” Jarrat said slowly, “you said you were thinking of going to Aurora. That’s the job offer?”

For a moment Harry glared blindly at the high ceiling with its fans and strip lights and hovering, unobtrusive security drones. “Aurora’s been in the newsvids enough lately. You’ve got to know the name of Cassius Brand. He placed a call to me, here.”

“He knows where you are?” Stone felt the first thread of concern.

“Of course he knows.” Jarrat’s jaw worked methodically on a chunk of meat. “Brand ... *Senator* Cass Brand, has been one of NARC’s loudest, most obnoxious advocates, since the department was floated. In fact, wasn’t he one of the movers and shakers who rubber-stamped the proposal to initiate this department in the first place?”

Del pushed back his chair and headed back into the lab. “That’s him. He was on the citizen’s council, a committee that drew up the proposal for the department and submitted it to government. He’s still a member of the Commission, the representative for Aurora. All of which gives him a security clearance high enough to know exactly what I do here.” Harry was rummaging among the clutter of datacubes and stacks of hard copies, searching for one item, and spoke over his shoulder. “All that’s a matter of public record. What you might not know is, very soon after NARC opened its doors for business, Cass Brand watched a medical team close the lid on the cryotank containing his son ... Angeldeath”

“Damn,” Stone muttered, “that’d have to make a guy declare war on the Angelpack.”

“It did. Ah, got it.” Del gestured with a white metal cube. “I had a few ulterior motives when I invited you to eat with me. I wanted you to look at this, too. Get a second opinion.”

“The call from Brand?” Jarrat picked up his plate and ambled after Del, through the ranks of benches and humming machinery.

The datacube dropped into a reader and Harry swiveled the monitor toward the younger men. “It came in via the NARC band, encrypted, and they forwarded it, uncensored. Which gives you a clue about the regard they have for Brand. Frankly, I was surprised to get it at all.” He paused to let Stone

catch up, and keyed the playback. "As I said, I need a second opinion before I make any decision. I'll tell you now, Bill Dupre doesn't want me to take the assignment, but as for myself ..." He gave the lab a glare. "I'm ready to climb these walls!"

Stone was less interested in the call than in the caller. Most of what he knew of Cassius Brand, he had learned from the Aurora dossier, a massive document compiled by Thule Tactical. He and Jarrat had reviewed all of it and digested most, on the way over, and Brand stood out from the document like an icon.

He was 86 years old now, and still a senator highly placed in colonial politics. The boy in the cryotank was Marcus, the one and only son of obscenely wealthy parents, and Stone could guess what Cass Brand wanted of Harry. This was the very work for which Del was best qualified. Only he could open the tank, release the boy, and before the Angel could kill him, heal Marcus, just as he had healed Tim Kwei, and before him, Stone himself.

On the screen, captured in the body of the recorded message, Cassius Brand was the archetype of the statesman: senior without being 'old,' his face weathered but not faded, the lines and silver hair of many adult decades tempered by bright eyes and commanding intelligence. He was still an extremely dynamic man, Stone saw; not young, but by no means was he ready to accept the retirement which would be thrust upon him in another decade or two. The voice was deep, almost gruff. The words were impassioned; the job offer was astonishing.

"Heal my son," Cass Brand growled, looking directly into the lens, and through it, at Harry. "Open that *coffin* we sealed him in, and do what you do, Doctor. Give me back my boy, and you can write your own check. Name a figure ... I promise you, no fee you can even imagine will be too much for me to pay for the life of my son." The lines of his face seemed to deepen, and he sighed. "Look at me, Doctor Del. Time has caught me up, and still I'm waiting for the 'cure' for Angel, which we dreamed about when I was young. I don't have very much more time to wait, and as for Marc ... he's waited far too long. You can call me back on this line. It's private, secure.

"And a word to the wise, Doctor: don't let Bill strong-arm you. Billy Dupre's a good boy, but he's second-generation NARC, which means, in his mind the welfare of the department supersedes any individual, any private cause, any personal crusade, no matter how righteous, how sacred." At last the senator smiled, though it was a faint, crooked expression touching only one corner of his mouth. "I don't happen to agree. Billy's got a right to his opinion, but consider this: Angel appeared out of God alone knows where, fifty years ago, and it'll be the nemesis of Mankind for a long time to come. What's a few weeks or months of your time, Doctor, against that?" Brand reached out toward his camera. "Call me. Soon." And he turned off.

For a moment Stone and Jarrat shared a silent conference, until Jarrat wondered, "What's Dupre say?"

"That they can't spare me here." Del pulled up a stool and sat. "That my work here is vastly more important, as if I'm on the edge of a breakthrough. Which I'm *not*. The truth is, he knows how bloody pissed I am at this project.

He's pretty sure, if I once get out of here — much less get my hands on the kind of fortune Cassius Brand is offering — NARC won't get me back in this lab for all the money in the Cygnus Colonies. And," Del added acidly, "Bill could be right." His dark eyes shifted from Jarrat to Stone and back again. "So how about the second opinion I was hoping for?"

Stone did not even have to pause to consider. "Take the job," he said without hesitation. "Do what Nature designed you to do, and take the old man's money. A few million credits would buy a whole new life for you and Tansy, and whichever of the kids wanted to go along, any place you wanted to start over."

"Kevin?" Harry's brows were up.

"Like he says." Jarrat hesitated no longer than Stone. "Do what you can for Brand's kid. Then think long and hard about what NARC is asking for. I know it's a bitch, Harry, but I can see both sides of the question. If Stoney had been Angel-immune when he was shot down in Chell ... and if he'd been able to track me around the planet after I was beat up ..." He shrugged. "Janine Cruz is showing a lot of guts."

"And a paucity of viable brain cells," Del said sourly. "All right, I'll give the project some thought, while I spend a whole lot of Cass Brand's money!" He popped the datacube out of the machine and tossed it in his palm like a die. "I think Bill Dupre does appreciate the position I'm in. He was good enough to let this call be forwarded. Give me the chance, the choice. He didn't have to let it through."

"Dupre's a company man," Stone allowed, "Brand makes a good point there! But Dupre's also a good guy. I've known him a long time." He looked up over Del's head at the plain, metal-face chrono set into the wall above the door. "Thanks for dinner, Harry. We'll probably get to Aurora ahead of you, and we'll keep track of you. We'll do dinner properly next time, on a NARC expense account."

"Somewhere uptown and expensive," Jarrat added, "and you can brief us on the Brand job."

It seemed a weight had been lifted from Del's shoulders. He visibly shed ten years while they watched. "Thanks. I'll appraise Bill of the situation in the morning, get official clearance to go ahead." He took a long, deep breath. "And get the hell out of this hole in the ground!"

Jarrat chuckled. "Don't tell Tansy exactly where you'll be."

"Cloak and dagger bullshit." Harry made a face.

"For a while longer," Jarrat argued. "Let Eldorado Tac do their job. If Stoney and me hadn't been up to our balls in the Death's Head business at the time, we'd have been there for you sooner — but even if we'd been able to save the house, your family would still have had to drop out of sight while the loose ends were tied off, the leaks plugged." He shared a wry glance with Stone. "It's the nature of this business. And it gets right up my nose sometimes." He offered his hand. "Congratulations on the new job, Harry. Now, get some sleep. You look like hell."

The empath, the 'queer,' clasped Jarrat's wrist for a moment, then Stone's. "I will. I'll catch you before you ship out."

“And we’ll see you in Aurora,” Stone promised as they headed for the door, with its granite-faced guard, the discreet drones that were the eyes and ears of the security system, and the single palm-locked elevator which was the only way to get out of the underground.

CHAPTER THREE

Equinox Towers rose like three dragon’s fangs over the skyline of Elysium, and launch bays in the top levels belched fire. Fifteen missiles chased upward, bright in the gloomy shadow of the green-faced gas giant, to meet the Blue Raven gunship. Before they were close, Blue Raven’s intercept warheads were in the air, and at once the sky thickened with palls of blue and gray smoke.

Imaging switched over to a computer-enhanced fusion of thermo and synthetic aperture. Blue Raven’s interceptors picked up almost every warhead from Equinox, and the sky seemed to erupt. The gibbous, cloud-wreathed face of Zeus danced with chemical fireflies for several seconds. But two missiles were smart enough, or lucky enough, to punch through the defense screen.

They ID’d as Paladins, manufactured by Black Mountain Engineers on Rethan for export to the frontier battlefields, on the Army defense contract. These were cheap, short-range ‘dumb’ weapons, and how Equinox Industries had come by a supply of them was as yet uncertain. They should never have been deployed in the city. The Paladin was designed to be launched by the score to defend a perimeter where overshoots, fuel-outs, brain-deads and blazing shrapnel would fall in a wasteland, a desert, anything but the suburbs of a panicked city.

The Blue Raven gunners chased down the mavericks, but Equinox Towers blocked their firing line. In the ECM confusion, the two Paladins had never acquired their target — the gunship — and simply went ballistic over Elysium until they were out of fuel.

Two fireballs blossomed, red-gold in the gloom. A thunderclap rolled over the skyline, but only seconds passed before it was eclipsed by another, deeper and more massive roar. Targets had been acquired by Blue Raven’s gunnery officers before they fired. Thirty warheads launched, and like a house of cards, Equinox Industries folded on itself.

The video was so clear, it had been color-corrected and the audio track cleaned up. “*Blue Raven 6.*” Jarrat’s voice, distorted by radio jamming, and answered a moment later by Gil Cronin: “*Right here. You want we should jump?*” Jarrat’s voice was razor sharp: “*Sample the air. That place was lousy with chemicals. Sniff for that bloody nerve gas!*” The same thing must have

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